

CHAPTER ONE

SPACE, BORDER, IDENTITY: THROUGH A POETIC LENS

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I

In an interview prior to his death, Michel Foucault, who theorized about heterotopia, said that 'Space is fundamental in any form of communal life, space is fundamental in any exercise of power' (qtd. in *Postmodern Geographies*, Edward W. Soja, 19). Now the space we live in is 'a heterogeneous space', à la Foucault: 'We do not live inside a void that could be colored with diverse shades of light, we live inside a set of relations that delineates sites which are irreducible to one another and absolutely not superimposable on one another' (Foucault, 23). The Marxist theorist Henri Lefebvre (in *The Production of Space*) argues that space is a social construct. As sex is biological but gender is a social construct, so within the natural space inhabited by humanity there are multiple spaces based on relations and values that we recognize and endorse in day-to-day life. The second half of the twentieth century saw a semantic extension of this concept. The body, and all that it represents, is conceived spatially. As the body is related to reproduction, the question of miscegenation—the interbreeding of people considered to be of different racial types—has become pivotal in recent studies (for example, purity vs. hybridity). 'Mongrelization' has been envisaged as a strategy for combating interracial feud and terrorism. Understandably, such an approach interrogates the monolithic concept of identity, and points more towards the porousness of various borders, geographical or imaginary, drawn in various names.

Space may be demarcated by drawing a line on a map, fencing a territory, or raising imaginary boundaries of separation. The notion of imaginary boundaries makes the border metaphorical. Border thus not only signifies tangible boundaries, dividing a place and people occupying the space, but also becomes a psychological category. As a metaphor, it may

encompass a temporal boundary as well. For example, when we talk of a generation gap, we refer to the timeline that separates people living on either side of a generation line. Theory of border or boundary is a cognitive theory of 'social classification' (Zerubavel, 1991; 1996): work/family, East/West, black/white, Brahmin/Dalit, straight/queer and the like. It takes into account issues such as the nature of categorization, the need for integration or segmentation of domains or roles specific to each domain, and the mechanism – for instance flexibility or permeability – for achieving it. It also seeks to probe how people construct, maintain, negotiate, or cross boundaries or borders, the lines of demarcation. Boundary crossing and role transitions are central to border theory. Nippert-Eng mentions two such strategies: placement, which 'draws the line between realms'; and transcendence, which keeps the boundary 'in place by allowing us to jump back and forth over it' (p. 8).

Identity is a loaded term, with complex layers of meaning. Identity is the outcome of the recognition of what one is to oneself and to others. Identity is a differential experience, requiring a borderline that marks out an individual or group within the circumscribed domain from those outside that space, geographical or imagined; that is, the specific literal or metaphorical border. The Platonic division between *eidos* and *eicon*, form and its derivatives, proved useful in understanding the relation between identity and difference. *What I am* can be grasped only from knowledge of what *I am not*. The French philosopher Gilles Deleuze, however, has shown the gap in this proposition, and maintains that if *eidos* can be distinguished from *eicon*, the latter can also be distinguished from the former. The reversal of order of occurrence in the binary redefines the status of privilege always enjoyed by the first member of any binary. This means there is only difference – no fixed, essentialist, stable identity. To quote Deleuze: 'If philosophy has a positive and direct relation to things, it is only insofar as philosophy claims to grasp the thing itself according to what it is, in its difference from everything it is not, in other words, in its *internal difference*' (32). In Deleuze's version, pure difference is non-spatio, temporal difference *per se*. For Deleuze there is no subject, there is only a differentiating process.

But as identity essentializes being, it presupposes the existence and necessity of a border. Thus a nation, a religious community, or a political party requires a border for the purity of its defined identity, but must cross it if it wants to re-define its identity. Border crossing, therefore, is looked upon as a transgressive act by the community that seeks to exercise power over a domain (cf. 'homogeneity necessary to the exercise of power', Kathleen Karr, 'Race, Nation, and Ethnicity' 377). Crossing the border

may be a homecoming for an exile, or an infiltration to the people on the other side of the inhabited domain if one is unwelcome there. Any intercultural encounter punctures a stable form of identity, thereby necessitating the creation of what Soja calls 'Thirdspace'. The advantage of this so-called transgression/infiltration is that it expands the horizon of our experience, re-moulding the familiar identity. Here a plurality of perspective – accessible by overleaping the border, that is, by negotiating with the Other – is a precondition of the assertion of identity. Two forces – centripetal (aligning oneself with a homogeneous community) and centrifugal (liberating oneself from set boundaries) – are simultaneously operative in human nature. This is comparable to the four forces in physics – gravitation and strong (inter and intra-particle attraction/bond), and electromagnetic and weak (radiation and dispersal). In-betweenness occurs when one recognizes the necessity of fusion, but refuses to commit oneself to either sensibility. Lack of commitment may be due to fear of contamination, that is, loss of the existing pure grain of identity. Moreover, since membership of a group is by nature exclusive, memory and a sense of attachment hold the person concerned back from integrating with the new community. But since the first half of the twentieth century opinion has changed greatly due to changes in attitude towards hybridity. If Modernists stressed the importance of fusion, 'post-modern hybridity emphasizes not fusion but multiple and mobile positionings created by performative transgressions of national grand narrative' (Kerr 379).

The need for re-interrogating the question of space and border, and how identity is related to these, has been felt since humanity stepped into a globalized borderless space. The revolution in information and communication technology has rendered geographical borders almost redundant, causing deterritorialization, to borrow the pet phrase of Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari (in *Anti-Oedipus*), especially of netizens. Yet identity politics succeeds in thriving in one essential area. In the last two decades the world has experienced traumatic violence and terror due to the stereotyping of identity-markers, or racial profiling: for example, black=inferior, Brahmin=superior, mulatto=criminal, Muslim=terrorist. While this prejudice has a political design and hence relates to power, it points to a mindset that is prone to maintain difference by securing the border, rather than crossing the border in search of the 'commonality which cuts across situated differences'. Soja has rightly advocated the creation of a 'Thirdspace' to escape the determinism inherent in physical or metaphorical spaces determined by a boundary:

I define Thirdspace as an-Other way of understanding and acting to change the spatiality of human life, a distinct mode of critical spatial awareness

that is appropriate to the new scope and significance being brought about in the rebalanced trialectics of spatiality-historicity-sociality' (Soja 1996, 57).

By encouraging us to jump the border, the Thirdspace, a heterotopos (Foucault draws our attention to the mirror image which is simultaneously physical, because the mirror is an object, and virtual, because the image is unreal) may catalyze de-separation.

The next section of this paper will attempt an examination of how these various aspects of space, border, and identity have been articulated in contemporary English poetry. I have chosen poetry for two reasons. First, border studies are principally focused on stories and fiction. Articulation of border-sensibility in poetry is somewhat less explored. Second, poetry – the most condensed form of literature – demands the utmost concentration in reading. While reading poetry, we cross the border of our own self most successfully and rewardingly. What is theorized may impress us as a felt experience. This idea has been touched upon by Mary Buchinger, in an interview in the journal *Border Crossing*:

I think poetry presents an opportunity to go both inside and outside oneself. The invitation to see something in a very different way – to enter into a sensibility utterly unlike your own – is an inherent invitation to experience your own reality differently. The self is challenged in encounters with others – *poetry has the power to disturb default understandings of the self and others* (emphasis added) (Buchinger).

II

David Wojahn, who received the Yale Series of Younger Poets award in 1981 for his collection *Icehouse Lights*, captures the borders of memory and desire in his poem 'Border Crossings'. The narrator presents a character who, trapped in a country with which he cannot identify himself, sets out to leave that country with his fiancée. He recognizes the border separating his colourful past from the panicky present, as he feels compelled to ignore the aesthetic tokens of his past life for the expedient escape from a cul-de-sac. But crossing the border is a woeful experience. It is:

... passing four

locked doors to reach her, as if each
were some frontier checkpoint
to a country even farther

distant than the one he's trapped
in now (Wojahn)

Li-Young Lee is an Indonesian-born American poet, whose father escaped from Indonesia because of rabid anti-Chinese sentiment and finally settled in the USA when Lee was still a child. In 'Immigrant Blues' Li-Young reveals the dilemma of immigrants, for whom acquisition of a new language is a survival strategy, yet who cannot bridge the insider-outsider divide for several generations. In the poem we hear the voice of an immigrant whose father advised him long ago to pick up the language of the country where they have settled. Ironically, to be an 'insider' he must bid farewell to his mother tongue. But border-crossing under compulsion –described in the poem as 'Loss of the Homeplace and the Defilement of the Beloved' – is actually a betrayal of one's self. The eventual bewilderment of the speaker is powerfully articulated in terms of sexual penetration:

If you don't believe you're inside me, you're not,
she answered, at peace with the body's greed,
at peace with the heart's bewilderment. (Lee)

In nature no space is owned, it is only inhabited; humanity is eager to draw a line to assert the extent of its authority in the name of sovereignty. So a fence is erected, a border is drawn, a boundary is raised to restrict access, to *exclude*. Carl Sandburg, the twentieth-century American poet and three-times winner of the Pulitzer Prize, describes the spatial reality of a border in his poem, 'A Fence'. The fence is hard and strong and any attempt to surmount it entails disaster:

The palings are made of iron bars with steel points that
can stab the life out of any man who falls on them. (Sandburg)

One may refer here to Tenzin Tsundue, a Tibetan poet born in India, who in his poem 'Crossing the Border' recreates the ordeal of fleeing Tibet to settle in India. Over vast snowy terrains, the refugees travel for several nights in order to avoid being spotted in daylight by patrolling planes. Without food, with only ice to quench their thirst, their limbs exhausted, and with children shrieking in fear and adults praying to 'Yishin Norbu' (the reincarnation of an accomplished lama), they manage to crawl along the snowfields without stopping, for the alternative is death. The poet movingly recounts the trauma of a mother who has lost her frost-bitten daughter in this fearful attempt to negotiate the border:

Then, one night, my daughter
 complained about a burning foot,
 She stumbled and rose again on her frost-bitten leg.
 Peeled and slashed with deep bloody cuts,
 She reeled and writhed in pain.
 By the next day both her legs were severed.
 Gripped by death all around,
 I was a helpless mother. (Tsundue)

Although the border is a line proclaiming thus-far-and-no-farther, it has to be negotiated if we are to emerge from the narrow cocoon of our individual selves.

As any border, cartographic or metaphorical, creates two territories under the control of different individuals/groups/entities (for example, past and present), without crossing the border one cannot succeed in joining the two hemispheres to make a globe. The border-side territories are therefore to be looked upon as complementary aspects of a fragmented whole. Crossing the border is imperative not only for existence, as in the case of refugees, but also for a fuller experience of our being, as a cultural by-product lowering tension in the world. The problem with any border is that, in the name of creating a homogeneous group, it creates a duality of identity – calling for commitment to one means being hostile to the other, if one fails to create an imagined Thirdspace, where contraries cease to exist. This duality is the theme of another poem of Tenzin Tsundue, entitled 'My Tibetanness'. The persona of the poem notes that even after 'thirty-nine years' of exile (following the Dalai Lama's escape to India in 1959), the lives of over one lakh (100,000) Tibetan 'refugees' in India, continue to be grim. They are 'People of a lost country, /Citizen to no nation':

At every check-post and office
 I am an 'Indian-Tibetan'.
 My Registration Certificate,
 I renew every year, with a *salaam*
 A foreigner born in India.

I am more of an Indian.
 Except for my chinky Tibetan face.
 'Nepali?' 'Thai?' 'Japanese?'
 'Chinese?' 'Naga?' 'Manipuri?'
 but never the question – 'Tibetan?'

I am a Tibetan.
 But I am not from Tibet.

Never been there.
Yet I dream
of dying there. (Tsundue)

The tone of the poem sensitizes us to the tragedy of being excluded, to being spatially *othered*. In his poem 'Night', significantly included in his book *Songs of Innocence*, the eighteenth-century English poet William Blake envisioned a heaven where the antitheses of Innocence and Experience, the Tyger and the Lamb are resolved:

And there the lion's ruddy eyes
Shall flow with tears of gold:
And pitying the tender cries,
And walking round the fold:
Saying ...
'And now beside thee, bleating lamb,
I can lie down and sleep...' (Blake)

But can what Blake calls this 'fearful symmetry' be achieved on earth? That calls for the rational dismantling of 'mind-forged manacles', crossing a thousand borders towards a healthier de-separation.

Border crossing can be a frustrating experience if the spatial line is crossed, but the temporal line stands frozen in history. In other words, if one crosses the border with an expectation of retreating to the space of a golden past, the time-space symbiosis is disturbed. The space of the past, the space one knew and treasured in one's memory, must have changed meanwhile. If we ignore this fact, and look for what was left before separation/migration – whether voluntary or under duress – we will be disappointed. This aspect of the border crossing experience is the focus of 'You Crossed the Border'. Written by Reza Mohammadi, a promising young Persian poet, it was inspired by the return of one of his friends to Afghanistan after an interval of many years:

Oh poet! You have come to the kingdom of misery,
to a land with no sky,
a land where poets trade in humanity,
where the mouths of prophets are stopped,
where dogs are ministers and donkeys are imams.
No calls to prayer issue from its mosques free of bribes. (Mohammadi)
(first translated by Hamid Kabir)

Another aspect of the disillusionment of the 'homecoming' of the displaced is expressed by Choman Hardi in her poem 'At the Border,

1979'. Hardi, a Kurdish poet also writing in English, has explored her childhood memory of her family's return to Iraq in 1979, after five years' exile in Iran. The poem presents two parallel points of view: that of the adults, who are enthusiastic about homecoming, and that of the observing child, who is critical. At the last checkpoint, where the land under their feet 'is divided by thick iron chain', they are elated and expectant, and 'soon everything would taste different'. The poet's sister in playful mood puts one leg on each side of the chain, and stands literally in two countries. Her mother is excited because soon they will have 'cleaner' roads, a 'more beautiful' landscape, and 'much kinder' people. But as they are given entry into Iraq, the poet has a different feeling. She was promised something better, carefully evoked by the use of the comparative—'cleaner' roads, 'more beautiful' landscape, 'much kinder' people. What she finds instead is:

The autumn soil continued on the other side
with the same colour, the same texture.
It rained on both sides of the chain.

We waited while our papers were checked,
our faces thoroughly inspected.
Then the chain was removed to let us through.
A man bent down and kissed his muddy homeland.
The same chain of mountains encompassed all of us. (Hardi)

This helps us recognize another important aspect of border – its arbitrariness. Spatially, border creates a barrier, a break in what is continuous. Border is arbitrary for two reasons. First, it clashes with the notion of freedom; ignoring the authority-configured border, be it the code of conduct dictated by patriarchy to women, or laws legislated by the powers that be, may invite disciplinary action. Second, it ruptures continuity, as signified by the repetition of 'same': '*same* colour, the *same* texture'. The idea of continuity is also foregrounded by the image of rain falling 'on *both* sides of the chain' and the '*same* chain of mountains encompassed all of us'. That the boundary is arbitrary, that the *other* is no other but the same, can be discovered only by one who has crossed the border. In 'Mending Wall' the twentieth-century American poet Robert Frost was hesitant to build a wall that might exclude what is to be included:

Before I built a wall I'd ask to know
What I was walling in or walling out,
And to whom I was like to give offence.

Something there is that doesn't love a wall,
That wants it down!' (Frost)

Given that the wall is already there, why not cross it to enrich our experience?

The existential crisis of people living in the borderlands has been brilliantly voiced by Gloria E. Anzaldúa, a Chicano poet-cum-social activist well-known for her book *Borderlands/La Frontera: The New Mestiza*. In her poem 'To Live in the Borderlands' she presents the precarious state of someone inhabiting a borderland. Such a person is likely to be the victim of nationalist/racist crossfire:

caught in the crossfire between camps
while carrying all five races on your back
not knowing which side to turn to, run from...(Anzaldúa)

As one's identity is likely to get hazy amidst these conflicting allegiances, the people living in the borderland feel the inadequacy of traditional identity-markers, but cannot always brush them aside:

To live in the Borderlands means knowing
that the *india* in you, betrayed for 500 years,
is no longer speaking to you,
that *mexicanas* call you *rajetas*,
that denying the Anglo inside you
is as bad as having denied the Indian or Black;
Cuando vives en la frontera
people walk through you, the wind steals your voice,
you're a *burra*, *buey*, scapegoat,
forerunner of a new race,
half and half— both woman and man, neither —
a new gender... (Anzaldúa)

In the borderlands an individual is 'the battleground / where the enemies are kin to each other':

To live in the Borderlands means
the mill with the razor white teeth wants to shred off
your olive-red skin, crush out the kernel, your heart
pound you pinch you roll you out
smelling like white bread but dead; (Anzaldúa)

So one must devise a survival strategy. One such is sitting on the fence:

But sitting on the fence is admitting the reality of the fence with no intention to cross it. As a thinker Anzaldua therefore recognizes the importance of cultivating a higher consciousness that dreams of transcending the limits of border in any form. In the concept "new *mestiza*" (a woman of mixed racial ancestry), Anzaldua recognizes this enlightened state that helps us challenge all forms of antinomies flanking on both sides of a given border: male/female; pious/atheist, Christian /Islam and the like. Mary Buchinger, a contemporary American poet by choice, by profession an Associate Professor of English, finely expresses what kind of symbiosis may help us 'to explore meanings of other close and mutually defining relationships', help us to tide over the differential crisis and progress towards a space of harmonious borderlessness. A river holds the rock in its 'flowing heart'; a river holds a tree on its 'sloped bank'. But the contrary is also true: 'I must ask/ as the sky asks/ of every pond, /ocean, stream, /is it you in my grasp, /is it me? (ref)

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